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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 001156

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA, DRL, G/TIP, AND DOL
DOL/ILAB FOR SEROKA MIHAIL, DRL/ILCSR FOR ALFRED ANZALDUA,
G/TIP FOR MEGAN HALL, SCA FOR JESSICA MAZZONE AND BRIAN
RORAFF

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: UNICEF DISCUSSES CHILD LABOR ACTION
PLAN

REF: TASHKENT 1149

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary: During a six-day visit to Uzbekistan, DRL Foreign Affairs Officer Rachel Waldstein met on September 23 with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Child Protection Officer Siyma Barkin to discuss the government's recent adoption of a National Action Plan on child labor. Barkin described the Plan as "overly ambitious" and "not realistic," as it aims to eliminate forced child labor within two years. According to Barkin, the government will focus this year on preventing secondary school students under the age of 16 from being mobilized, and will seek to prevent college-age students from being mobilized in future years. Separately, Waldstein met on September 26 with human rights activists in Jizzakh province, who reported that secondary school students had been mobilized in their province. It appears that despite the Plan and a government decree at least some children are picking cotton this year, but how many and how young they are is still unclear. We agree with UNICEF that efforts to eliminate child labor in Uzbekistan should be systematic and part of a long-term strategy aimed at addressing related and broader issues, including rural poverty, unemployment, labor migration, and the perverse effects of cotton quotas. End summary.

NATIONAL ACTION PLAN PUBLISHED IN LOCAL PAPER

12. (C) On October 3, a copy of the government's recently adopted National Action Plan on child labor was published in the local media. The Plan includes mechanisms for implementation of ILO child labor conventions, deadlines for performance, and the ministries responsible for each activity. Articles 11 and 12 in the Plan state that forced labor by school children will not be allowed and that mechanisms should be improved to ensure school attendance.

Other articles of the Plan also refer to data gathering, accounting, inspection, permanent monitoring to ensure national compliance with ILO conventions, and participation by Uzbek officials in international discussions on the subject.

UNICEF DESCRIBES PLAN AS "OVERLY AMBITIOUS"

13. (C) On September 23, Waldstein met with UNICEF Child Protection Officer Siyma Barkin, who described the Plan as "overly ambitious" and "not realistic" for its two-year time frame. Barkin argued that the use of child labor in Uzbekistan was a complex issue that could not be addressed overnight and without first finding alternatives sources of labor, noting that child labor was most prevalent in regions with high-levels of adult labor outmigration (mainly to Russia and Kazakhstan). Barkin noted that the Plan's short-term perspective was characteristic of other action plans undertaken by the Uzbeks in recent years, which tended to lack long-term planning.

14. (C) Barkin said that she had shared UNICEF's concerns over the Plan with the Ministry of Labor, which she said has been responsive to their criticisms. Barkin was reportedly told by government contacts that authorities will concentrate this year on preventing primary and secondary school students under the age of 16 from being mobilized for the harvest, and will focus on preventing college and university-age students from being mobilized only in future years.

RETAILERS' LETTER TO GOU HAS IMPACT

15. (C) Barkin said that a letter from U.S. retailers raising concern over the use of child labor in the cotton harvest had reached the highest levels of the Uzbek government (Note: Walmart announced on September 30 that it was requiring its suppliers to stop sourcing cotton from Uzbekistan in an effort to end child labor there. End note.) She believed that pressure from American and European retailers was a factor - though not the only one - behind the government's decision to adopt the ILO conventions and the National Action Plan.

OFFICIALS CAN NOW OPENLY TALK OF CHILD LABOR

16. (C) Barkin reported that the government has shifted its position on child labor over the last few years, first denying that it existed, and then later claiming that child labor existed within families but was not compelled by the state. This year, however, she noted that for the first time the government has admitted that forced child labor exists in Uzbekistan. Barkin reported that one of the most positive effects of recent government actions is that they are seen by lower-level officials as a "green light" that they can talk more freely about the problem.

UNICEF PLANS INFORMAL ASSESSMENT OF CHILD LABOR THIS FALL

17. (C) Barkin reported that the government turned down UNICEF's request to conduct an independent assessment of child labor this fall and instead announced that it would conduct its own assessment, inviting UNICEF to participate. UNICEF declined to participate, anticipating that the government's assessment would lack objectivity, but agreed to observe the process informally. (Note: During a later meeting with Emboffs on September 30, Barkin reported that authorities indefinitely postponed a scheduled assessment visit with UNICEF to cotton fields in Ferghana Valley during the week of September 29. End note.)

18. (C) In addition to observing the government's assessment, Barkin reported that UNICEF planned to conduct its own informal assessment of child labor during the harvest. UNICEF employees planned to make unannounced visits in

unmarked cars to schools and agricultural areas in different regions of the country. Barkin also discussed with poloff organizing another informal roundtable with foreign diplomats in mid-October to share observations. Barkin also reported that private firms that buy cotton from Uzbekistan will conduct their own spot visits to assess the extent to which child labor is used in the harvest.

¶9. (C) Barkin also said UNICEF planned to conduct awareness raising activities in several regions this fall, including roundtables with labor inspectors and representatives from the Ministry of Labor and Farmers Association. Barkin believed these activities were critical, as UNICEF often encountered local officials who knew little about the country's anti-child labor legislation.

¶10. (C) Barkin reported that, so far, UNICEF has observed that fewer primary and secondary school students under age 16 have been mobilized this year than in previous years. However, she noted that college-age students between 16 and 18 years old continued to be mobilized (Note: Human rights activists and Emboffs have since seen evidence of students

under the age of 16 picking cotton in at least certain regions of the country, see paragraphs below. End note.)

MEETING WITH HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS IN JIZZAKH PROVINCE

¶11. (C) On September 26, Waldstein met with several human rights activists in Jizzakh who are monitoring child labor during the cotton harvest in their province. According to the activists, provincial authorities mobilized college students to pick cotton between September 14 and 16, and mobilized secondary school students as young as the eighth grade between September 22 and 24. One of the activists, Odil Razzokov, is a teacher at a secondary school and reported that that all secondary schools in Jizzakh province were affected. Another of the activists, Mamur Azizov, said that he had visited make-shift dormitories where college-age students mobilized for the cotton harvest are housed by authorities, and found a lack of adequate medical care and food. He also observed students occasionally drinking water directly from irrigation ditches. Azizov also reported that he was detained by police for four hours after he attempted to videotape students at a local college being loaded on to buses to be taken to the cotton fields (Note: Azizov did not show the video to Waldstein and poloff. End note.)

¶12. (C) The Jizzakh activists' statements about students being mobilized for the cotton harvest more or less matched what activists in neighboring Syrdarya province reported to poloff on October 2 (reftel). However, Azizov was quoted in a September 23 article on the International War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) website as stating that law enforcement officials were patrolling cotton fields in Jizzakh province to make sure that children were not picking cotton this year.

OBSERVATIONS FROM OTHER ACTIVISTS

¶13. (C) Ezgulik Chairwoman Vasilya Inoyvatova, whose organization has regional branches across Uzbekistan, told Waldstein on September 21 that children under the age of 16 were mobilized for the cotton harvest this year. However, on the same day, Free Farmers Party leader Nigara Khidoyatova, whose organization includes farmers in several regions of the country, told Waldstein that secondary school students were not being mobilized this year, though she noted that college-age students were being mobilized.

¶14. (C) In September, the majority of articles on independent internet websites pointed towards a decrease in the number of secondary school students picking cotton this year. However, in the past two weeks, there has been an increase in the number of reports of secondary students picking cotton, but mostly from unreliable sources such as

uznews.net. (Note: Children are more likely to be used in the second and third phases of the harvest. The second phase typically begins in late-September or early-October. End note.)

COMMENT

¶15. (C) It remains unclear whether fewer children have been mobilized for the cotton harvest this year, as reports continue to circulate from different regions of the country of children as young as 14 picking cotton. Regional officials are certainly caught in a bind, as on one hand they have been ordered by Tashkent not to mobilize school

children, but on the other hand, they will be punished if they do not meet their cotton quotas. Due to poor weather and a lack of water this year, cotton yields are reportedly lower, and regional officials might be under growing pressure to use secondary school students in an effort to reach their quotas, especially after President Karimov recently rebuked Tashkent province for its low cotton output. We will continue to watch the situation closely. UNICEF remains one of the most objective and balanced sources of information on child labor in Uzbekistan, and we plan to trade notes with them again at an informal roundtable the Embassy will host next week for international organizations and foreign diplomats.

¶16. (C) We agree with UNICEF that efforts to combat child labor during the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan should be systematic and not aimed at eliminating the problem overnight, an approach which is likely to fail and potentially even worsen the situation for rural laborers and children. Efforts to eliminate child labor in Uzbekistan need to be part of a broader long-term strategy aimed at addressing related and broader issues, such as rural poverty, unemployment, labor migration, and the perverse effects of cotton quotas. Sadly, it comes as no surprise that regional officials continue to rely upon child labor, as alternative sources of labor are not in place. Government follow-through and independent monitoring will be required.

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